



## HOW TO HELP A HOARDER

Hoarding is a common problem that is difficult to treat. To be sure, you may have seen reality TV shows about people who hoard mail, gadgets, cats, and even trash. You may be puzzled as to how people can live in such conditions why they just can't let go of certain items.

Indeed, when people aren't able to throw things away, piles can grow to the ceiling. These piles can make it impossible to use bathrooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. The piles may fall over, trap, and injure people. They can catch on fire. Cluttered homes and yards may attract pests. Neighbors may call the police. Parents may lose custody of children.

### **WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HOARDING**

There are a lot of misconceptions about hoarders. For example, people don't choose to be hoarders. And they aren't being sloppy or lazy. This is a very real mental disorder. It is important to recognize that people with hoarding disorder have lost control of their decision-making abilities.

Research suggests it's hard for people with this disorder to part with items, even things with no real-world value. Scientists have found that brain activity is different between people with hoarding disorder and healthy people.

Many people with hoarding disorder often don't seem terribly bothered by their circumstance. If they don't have to make a decision, the parts of their brain that are largely in charge of becoming bothered are underactive. But if they are forced to decide about whether to discard something, that part of the brain becomes overactive. And so, the brain is essentially screaming that everything is important.

Doctors don't know what causes hoarding disorder. There's no X-ray or blood test for a diagnosis. Instead, doctors assess how well people are functioning in their lives. Hoarding disorder can start during a person's teens or later. It may grow more severe over the decades.

## HOW TO TAKE ACTION

If you know someone who may need help, try to be gentle, calm, and patient. It may take several conversations before the person agrees to work on the problem. Try not to start an argument. If a person is not really motivated to do something about the problem, they can become even more stubborn in their ways. Arguing can even make the problem worse.

There's no effective medication for hoarding disorder, although studies are in progress. Right now, cognitive behavioral therapy is the only evidence-based treatment we have for hoarding. This is a type of talk therapy that teaches people how to change their thinking patterns and react differently to situations.

Some people with hoarding disorder are helped by joining a support group with others who have the disorder. There are also organizing professionals who specialize in helping people get rid of clutter.

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## HOW TO HELP A PERSON WHO HOARDS

### Explain why you're concerned:

*"I'm worried that you could fall or become trapped."*

*"I'm concerned that you may lose custody of your children."*

*"I'm afraid your home will catch on fire."*

### Then say how to get help:

*"I can help you find a therapist who specializes in hoarding."*

*"We can look for a self-help program on how to let things go."*

*"We can find support groups for people who hoard."*

*"We can ask the county for resources."*

